



# East Africa, the Comoros Islands and Madagascar before the sixteenth century : on a neglected part of the world system

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# *East Africa, the Comoros Islands and Madagascar before the sixteenth century*

## *On a neglected part of the World-System*

Philippe Beaujard

‘[The port of] Somanâth [Gujarat] has become so successful because it is [...] a stopping point for people travelling between Sofala and the Zanj country and China’ (al-Bîrûnî, ca. 1030, trans. Ferrand 1907: 552)

The historical developments of East Africa and its region are illuminated by the cycles of the Eurasian and African world-system, where the Indian Ocean is embedded. It is in this framework that we can best understand the rise of the Swahili culture as a semi-periphery between dominant cores and dominated social groups which were situated in the African interior and on outlying islands (Comoros, Madagascar) or were composed of lower classes in urban territories. On the Swahili coast, a ‘proto-capitalism’ thrived within a culture of city-states where state and private modes of accumulation complemented rather than rivalled each other. Madagascar exemplifies a peripheral construction within this global context, with cities emerging where Indian Ocean networks and insular routes converged. For geographic as well as historical reasons, different areas of the world-system appear to have played a pre-eminent role on the East African coast at different times. Societal movements also partly grow out of internal dynamics which in themselves modify regional evolutions. For this reason, within the world-system, the entire set of interactions between the local, regional and global levels should be taken into account.

Like the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean was traversed by ships from a very early date. The development of exchange networks in this ocean led to a progressive integration of its different regions into a stratified space and to the rise of littoral societies. At the beginning of the Christian era, the articulation of the Indian Ocean with the China Sea and the Mediterranean, and the interconnections between maritime and terrestrial routes, seem to have built a Eurasian and African world-system (Beaujard, 2005, 2007c; Chase-Dunn & Hall 1997; Wallerstein 1974 ; *contra* Chaudhuri 1985: 20). These exchanges were not only an extension of government policy: they were also frequently the result of religious expansion and private enterprise.

This world-system was based from its inception upon 3 or 4 'cores', which held a position of dominance over their peripheries: China, India, West Asia and Egypt. Geographic (Diamond 1997) and demographic (Boserup 1965) factors are obviously implicated in the inequalities which evolved; these inequalities also resulted from mechanisms of production and exchange, exchange which was embedded in religious and political configurations. The system developed through 4 cycles, each cycle with phases of growth and demise: from the 1st to the 6th, from the 7th to the 10th, from the 10th to the 14th, and from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 17th centuries (Figure 1). It grew along with the exploitation both of the environment and of larger and larger geographical and social peripheries. At the same time, above all in periods of expansion of the world-system, some regions or social categories were drawn upwards through exchanges with the cores and other peripheries if/when they were able to respond to the growing market demand

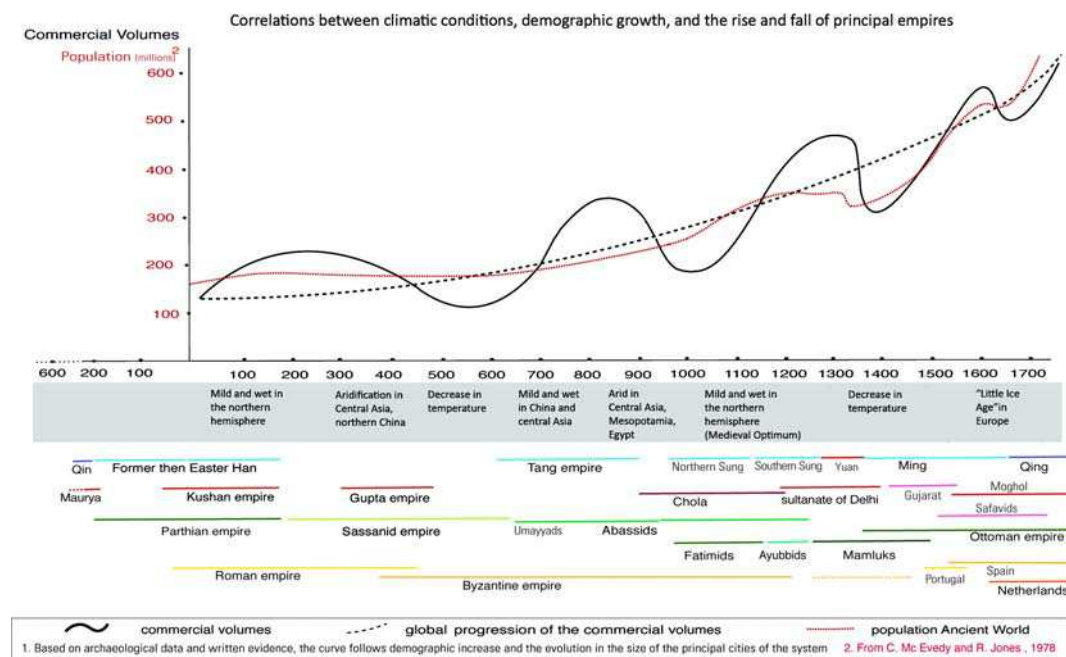


Fig. 1. Postulated economic cycles in the Eurasian and African world-system (1<sup>st</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>1</sup>

in raw materials and finished products and were also able to exploit their own geographic and social margins, as was the case for example for semi-peripheries such as the Swahili coast and Southeast Asia.

The birth of this world-system might explain the movements of Mediterranean merchants towards South Asia, the so-called 'indianisation' of South-East Asia, and the navigations of Austronesian people to China or towards East Africa and Madagascar. It also accounts for the formation of a Pre-Swahili culture on the East African coast, a region which curiously has been underestimated or ignored by some writers on the Indian Ocean (Benjamin 2006).

Two opposing explanations for the flowering of the East African coast have been proposed. First, that a foreign culture (notably Arabic, Persian and later Indian) was

brought to the coast and imposed on the local inhabitants by migrants. Alternatively, that a Pre-Swahili and then Swahili culture emerged from indigenous developments and owed little to migrants. I hold that we can overcome this opposition by viewing the Swahili culture as an African one which – largely or partly, depending on the region considered – developed via long distance exchange embedded in the Eurasian and African world-system. I hope to demonstrate that a non-holistic world-system approach (Beaujard 2005; Morin 1990; *contra* Frank 1998, 2005), taking into account all the interactions between global, regional and local levels, constitutes a useful model which enables us to recognise and understand: the emergence and the evolution of an international division of labour in the Indian Ocean, over the *longue durée*; the connections – often otherwise overlooked – between events in distant regions, and between the regions themselves; the existence of cycles, both economic and political, in the development of East Africa (Beaujard 2005); shifts of power between competing centres, and changing inequalities with both processes of domination (sometimes going along with the ‘development of underdevelopment’) and processes of co-evolution set in motion by the system and local expansions. Some regions were able to benefit from the general growth of the system, notably certain parts of the East African littoral. So were some social groups, which constituted an interface between dominant regions of the world-system and peripheries situated in the African interior and offshore islands (Comoros, Madagascar).

### First cycle (1st-6th century)

Three regions served as the driving forces of the trade networks which extended from the Mediterranean to the China Sea (Figure 2): the Chinese Han empire, the Roman Empire and, between them, the Kushan empire and Indian states. Textiles were already being exported by China (silk) and India (cotton) to various countries. Peripheries provided

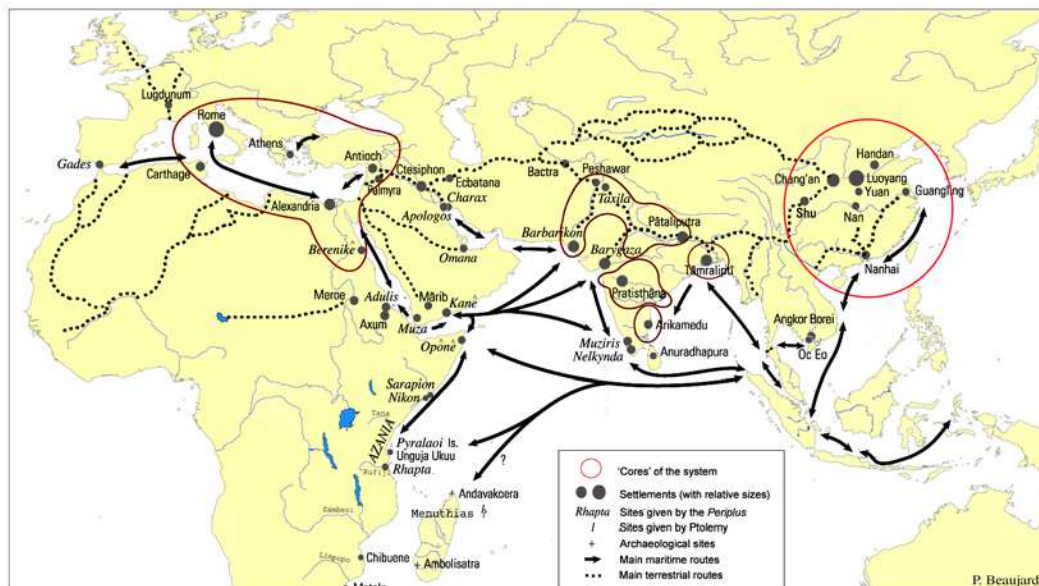


Fig. 2. The Eurasian and African World-System from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century

raw goods and slaves. The incipient tri-continental world-system was responsible for the emergence of a pre-Swahili maritime culture which enjoyed contacts with the Roman world, the Axumite kingdom, Sassanid Persia, India, and Arabia, contacts for which there is today archaeological evidence (Chami 1999: 205-215, 2000: 208-214; Horton 1996: 446-448; Juma 1996: 148-154, 2004: 107; Spear 2000: 257-290). Market-towns appeared along the East African coast (Figure 2). According to the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (written between AD40 and 70), Arab people would trade with Africans at Rhapta, probably on the Tanzanian coast. Archaeology has produced evidence of the arrival of Bantu-speaking farmers, who initiated the advent of the Iron Age from Kenya to Mozambique, an expansion which may have been connected to oceanic exchanges and trade between the coast and inland regions (for linguistic evidence, Nurse and Hinnebusch 1993: 288-289, 491-493). Although the data for this cycle are rather fragmentary, from the 4th century, Zanzibar and the continental coast lying opposite may have constituted a centre of gravity for trade. However, evidence of trade comes also from the Somali coast, Kenya and Mozambique. Iron might have been traded, along with slaves and tortoise shells (Casson 1989: 59; Horton and Middleton 2000: 73).

Transoceanic contacts reached as far as Southeast Asia. References to shipments of cinnamon arriving on the Horn of Africa in the *Periplus* and by Pliny reveal the interconnection between East Africa and eastern Indian Ocean networks as early as the 1st century AD. It may be during this period too that Austronesians arrived in the Comoros and in Madagascar. We have some clues of a human presence in Madagascar in the first centuries of the Christian era. These Austronesians introduced cultivated plants originating in South-East Asia (bananas, rice, great yam...). The Austronesian migrations were evidently not a product of chance; rather, they point to trade strategies that were part of the development of the incipient world-system.

### Second cycle (6th-10th century)

After a decline between the 4th and 6th centuries, partly due to a global climatic deterioration, an economic upturn coincided with a general rise in temperatures and an increase in precipitation in the Indian Ocean, as well as in Northern China, at the end of the 6th century. These changes induced agricultural changes which facilitated the creation of two large empires: the Chinese Tang empire, which was open to foreign commerce by way of the silk trade on land and sea routes, and the Muslim empire, which encompassed a territory reaching from Central Asia to Spain. The interconnection of these two empires led to a spectacular rise in production and exchange. Due to their central location within the world-system, great Indian kingdoms played a crucial role in expanding the networks (Figure 3).

Tang China enjoyed a pre-eminent position in the world-system (Adshead 2004), partly due to its exports of silk and porcelain; but in the western Indian Ocean, Islam structured the exchange networks. Islamic merchant communities appeared very early in East Africa connected in particular to Oman and the Persian gulf. The integration of East Africa in the world-system led to the rise of mercantile and religious centres – particularly on islands off the coast (Figure 3) – and to the emergence of elites. These elites, who might be called ‘Zanjian’, monopolised contact with the external world, and played an intermediary role between dominant regions (Persia, Egypt, Arabia, India) and peripheries



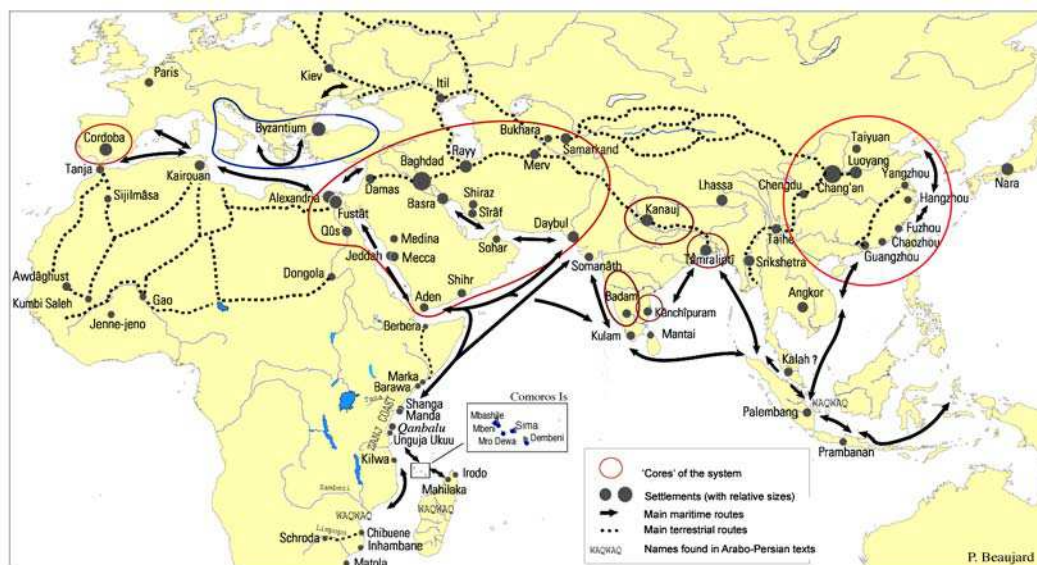


Fig. 3. The Eurasian and African World-System from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> century

(e.g. the African hinterland, the Comoros Islands and Madagascar), thereby constituting – until the 19th century – what Wallerstein (1974) has called a semi-periphery. This transformation of the Swahili coast into a semi-periphery occurred during a period of growth in the world-system. ‘Agents’ from the cores or other semi-peripheries were present in the East African ports of trade, where they formed alliances with the local elites, who converted to Islam. These processes contributed to an ideological, economic and political configuration specific to the East African semi-periphery, a configuration that intensified the phenomena of dependence and transfers of wealth to the cores. The Zanzibar elites benefitted from their relationships with the Oceanic world at the expense of those on the margins of their socio-political entities and the Swahili coast also developed in terms of agriculture, craftsmanship, and social differentiation. Along with Islam, the introduction of a writing system, which facilitated trade and credit, played a major role in the formation of East African societies as well as in the expansion of exchanges.

Archaeologists have unearthed the same kind of pottery from Kenya to Mozambique, as well as in the Comoros, but not in Madagascar. We find three key-regions on the coast: the Lamu archipelago, the Zanzibar area, and the south of Mozambique. The main exports were ivory, iron, wood, gold and slaves. A slave trade flourished at least until the uprising of the Zanj slaves in Mesopotamia in 868. Texts mention African slaves in Tang China (Lombard 1990: 30). Gold from the Limpopo and Zimbabwe was probably exported from the 7th century and seems to have made an impact on the coastal economy from that period (Swan 1994). On the Mozambican coast, ‘from ca. 650 AD onwards’ (Sinclair and Håkansson 2000: 466), Chibuene and other sites entered into contact with Indian Ocean trade and with the Limpopo region (Huffman 2000; Horton and Middleton 2000: 98, 100-1; Sinclair 1982, 1987). The main imports at this period came from the Persian gulf, although Chinese ceramics were also included. Indian pottery has also been found on Manda and in Unguja Ukuu; so in all probability Indians frequently visited the East African coast. Possible evidence includes the oral traditions of the *Wadebuli*, which

suggest that Northwest India (Daybul) was involved in the slave trade in ancient times (Allen 1993: 170 ; Pouwels 2002: 394-396).

In the 9th and 10th centuries, the demise of the Tang and Muslim empires led to social disorder and political fragmentation. Tulunid and then Fatimid Egypt and the Red Sea both benefitted from the downturn of other cores of the world-system. This new importance of the Red Sea, which accompanies the reconfiguration of the exchange networks, sheds light on the rise of trade in East Africa at the end of this period and on the Arab-Swahili thrust towards the Comoros and Madagascar, where the first *métissages* occurred between the Austronesians and the new immigrants (Dewar & Wright 1993). In northern Madagascar, the first known settlements, such as Mahilaka, reveal contacts with Indian Ocean networks, which brought West Asian and Chinese pottery, and exports of chloritoscist to the Comoros. In the Comoros islands, the Dembeni phase, with its mixed Asian and African culture, developed from the end of the 8th century (Allibert 1992; Wright 1984).

### Third cycle (11th-14th century)

From the end of the 10th century to the 14th century, China, under the Sung dynasty, would play the role of a locomotive pulling the carriages of the world-system train (metaphor borrowed from Frank 1998: 277). In India the major political powers were located in the east, with the Bengali kingdom and the Chola thalassocracy on the Coromandel coast, although the merchant communities of Gujarat and the Malabar coast were also very active in all the networks. In the western region of the Indian Ocean, under the successive impetuses of Fatimid and Ayyûbid Egypt, the Red Sea overtook the Persian Gulf in importance. Expansion of the system was bolstered by a climatic

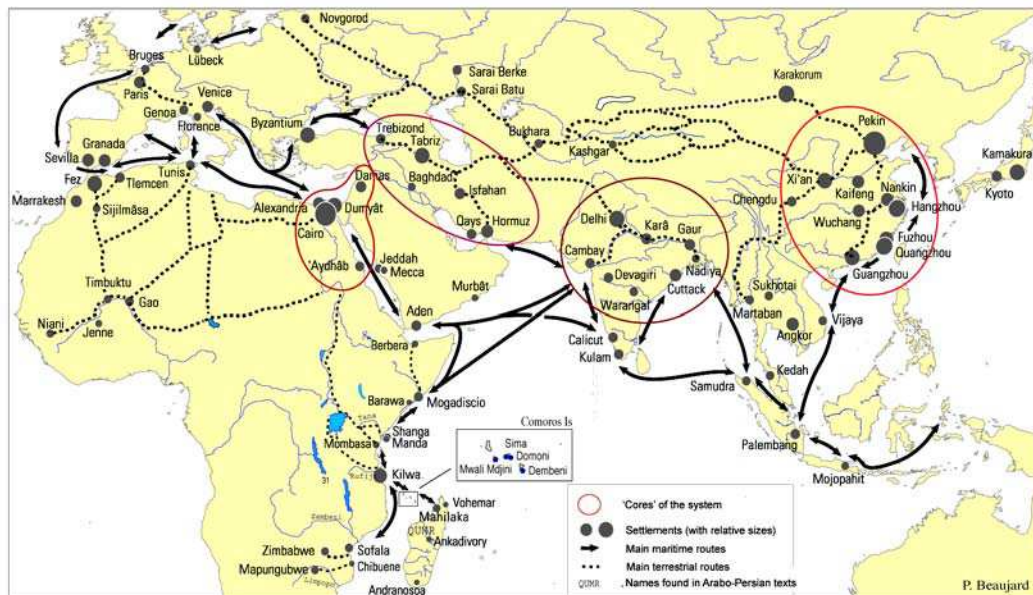


Fig. 4. The Eurasian and African World-System in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries



amelioration in the 11th and 12th centuries (Liebermann 2003: 92-3, 104). In the 13th century, the emergence of the Mongolian semi-periphery as a major political power led to a drastic reshuffling of the exchange networks, with the creation of Mongol states in China, Persia and eastern Europe. Another development in this regard was the formation of the Sultanate of Delhi in India, which served as a counterpoint to Mongolian expansion (Figure 4). In the western Indian Ocean, under Mamlûk rule, Egypt was able to halt the Mongol advance, and Kârimî merchants played a pre-eminent role in trade with India, taking the Yemeni hub as a base of operations. This century also marks the dawn of a second period of Islamic expansion, not only in India, but also in Southeast Asia and East Africa.

The Swahili coast was now fully transformed into an active semi-periphery, during a period of expansion of the whole world-system. Echoing earlier assertions by Alpers (1975) and Sheriff (1976), Horton and Middleton (2000: 89-90) have recently stressed the fact that the co-evolution of Swahili cities and system cores was accompanied by the exploitation of the African interior, by both coastal and foreign groups. Pearson, who studies the period after the 15th century, acknowledges that Swahili and foreign merchants made 'massive profits' but, he argues, this does not necessarily point to exploitation (1998: 117; cf. Beaujard 2007a). He goes even further, stating that 'in fact, the Africans had the advantage'. In writing thus, Pearson chooses to ignore the exploitative mechanisms and to underestimate the scale of the exchanges, in volume, time and space. He also neglects the role of trade in the creation of stratified societies such as those in the Limpopo Valley or in Great Zimbabwe. The growing integration of the East African coast in the world-system was in fact accompanied by increased social differentiation and the development of unequal relationships, both external and internal.

By this time, Islam was present along the coast in settlements of various sizes. Merchants and men of religion coming from the Persian Gulf, South Arabia and the Red Sea contributed to the spread of Islam, as did Swahili groups such as the Shirazi (Horton & Middleton 2000: 57-61; see also Pouwels 1987: 10-21). Qarmatians from Bahrain and Ibadis from Oman (Horton 2001; Wilkinson 1981) could have influenced the oligarchic organisation of the northern Swahili coast city-states (also Allen 1993: 203; Horton 1996: 426; Middleton 1992: 91), which developed in opposition to the 'Shirazi' royal system; this latter was maintained in certain northern cities and on the southern Swahili coast. The expansion of the Swahili coast was the result of the trade boom in the Indian Ocean and of African internal developments, based on commerce and craftsmanship, but also on an intensification of agriculture and fishing. Swahili towns imported textiles from the cores but also produced materials exported to the interior. East Africa still provided ivory and slaves. Al-Bîrûnî alludes to the export of East African slaves to Sind and other regions of India in the 11th century. Idrîsî speaks of slaves leaving for Yemen and the Persian Gulf, and of raids carried out by Qays (Kish) (Persian Gulf) on the Zanjian coast (12th century). Texts mention the presence of African slaves in southern Asia and China in the 13th and 14th centuries (Beaujard 2007a; Horton 1996: 415). Characteristic of the Swahili world (at least in the northern part), 'stonetowns' inhabited by patricians developed in opposition to, but also in conjunction with the 'rural' settlements (Figure 5). Kilwa, which controlled the gold and ivory trade with Sofala, became pre-eminent from the 12th century. Its expansion was linked to that of the state of Mapungubwe and later of Great Zimbabwe, as well as to exchanges in the Indian Ocean: Kilwa's golden age in the first part of the 14th century precisely coincided with the peak growth of the world-system during its third phase. The founding of a new



*Fig. 5. East Africa and Madagascar (11<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> century)*



dynasty from southwestern Arabia in Kilwa in the 13th century reflects the heightened importance of Yemen, which had become independent in 1235 under the rule of the Rasûlids. Sharifian lineages from Yemen settled on the East African coast, where they offered religious expertise to the Swahili communities.

Indian merchants or craftsmen also sailed to and settled on the East African coast (Horton 1996: 418). The Chinese, who were already present in Ceylon and on the coasts of India at this time, may have also been plying the African coast. They became more involved in Indian Ocean trade in the 12th and 13th centuries, once the Southern Sung Empire directed its efforts into maritime trade. Chinese books and maps frequently refer to the East African coast (Hirth & Rockhill 1911; Needham & Wang Ling 1959: 555; Wheatley 1975: 110-111).

Swahili ships, notably from Kilwa, also traded with the Comoros and Madagascar. In this period (11th-14th century), the expansion of the Swahili world towards the Comoros and Madagascar quickened its pace. Stone buildings developed in the Comoros from the 13th century (Wright 1992: 84). Archaeology reveals an important iron metallurgy at Maote, perhaps based on servile labour. Idrîsî reported that iron was exported to India, and he spoke of the travels of Comorians and Malagasy people to the Sofala coast to get gold and iron (Viré 1984: 26, 34).

In Madagascar, ecological transformations are noticeable from the end of the 10th century in the north-west and in the 11th century in the highlands. They may be the result of arrivals of new groups from the East African coast. These migrants practised pastoralism, and agriculture using African plants. Arabic-Persian and Chinese texts, and archaeology, attest to the – albeit limited – integration of Madagascar into the world-system. Trade networks are highlighted by the findings of imported pottery (from China, Persian gulf) on the Malagasy highlands. Moreover, the South of Madagascar (Androy) also shows imports in this period, probably connected to East African networks. But the main trading settlement was Mahilaka, in the north-west, which became a true town in the 13th and 14th centuries, a development linked with the rise of the Swahili and the Comorian towns (Radimilahy 1998). Moreover, new settlements such as Vohemar in the north-east of Madagascar may be linked to prolonged connections with the Indonesian world (Adelaar 1995; Beaujard 2003). The Insulindians brought to the East coast of Madagascar and to Imerina (highlands) new conceptions of government – Malay (Sîrîwijaya and post-Sîrîwijaya), and/or Javanese (Mojopahit) in origin – associated with wetland rice cultivation techniques. During this entire period, the north-east of Madagascar continued to export chloritoschist pots to the Comoros and East Africa (Vérin 1975: 747, 1990: 61). The Malagasy themselves traded in Africa and as far as Aden, as mentioned in an oft quoted passage by Ibn al-Mujâwir (ca. 1240), who wrote that the Malagasy stopped making these distant voyages to the north in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

In the years 1320-1330, the world-system experienced a period of sharp decline, initiated or exacerbated by a major climatic deterioration. In 1346, a bubonic plague epidemic swept through Asia and the Indian Ocean region, from China to Egypt and to Europe. Kilwa seems to have experienced a population loss during this period. No Kilwa ruler struck money after 1374. Reconstruction of the Great Mosque of Kilwa, which collapsed sometime in the 14th century, was delayed until the following century. Some scholars conjecture that the plague may have reached Kilwa, but, in any case, the downfall in the city's fortune had begun before that date (Sutton 2001: 433). In Madagascar, the city of Mahilaka and the South region (Androy) experienced a drop in population during

the same period, a phenomenon related to the trade downturn and the climatic changes noted in other regions of the Indian Ocean.

#### Fourth cycle (15th-beginning of the 16th century)

After six or seven decades of recession, production and exchange once again took an upswing, bolstered this time not only by the resurgence of China under the Ming dynasty (until its voluntary withdrawal from the international scene in 1433) but also by European dynamism. Stimulated by the rivalry among Genoese, Venetians, Portuguese, and Spaniards in their quest for gold and spices, the capitalist system flourished in the entrepreneurial Occident of the 15th century. From this period, Indians would also play a major role in exchanges within the Indian Ocean. The disintegration of the Sultanate of Delhi gave rise to cosmopolitan merchant sultanates that looked toward the sea, especially in Gujarat and Bengal. There also emerged powerful new states such as the Bahmanî sultanate and the Vijayanâgara empire (Figure 6). Egypt experienced internal problems aggravated by the external threat posed by the rising Ottoman power. This led to a relative demise of merchant activities in the Red sea which gave advantage to Hormuz and the Persian gulf. At the same time, a Cambay-Malacca route established itself as a major axis in the eastern Indian Ocean. Meanwhile, the Genoese, and later the Iberians, were seeking a way to circumvent the double obstacles of Ottoman power and Venetian control of the trade routes with Egypt and the Indian Ocean. Their efforts to this end led, firstly, to the discovery of America on behalf of the king of Spain by the Genoese Christopher Columbus in 1492 and secondly, to the foray of Vasco da Gama's Portuguese fleet into the Indian Ocean in 1498.

The revival of exchanges in the Indian Ocean resulted in a growth in the number and size of the towns on the East African coast (Figure 6). Although Islamic pottery continued

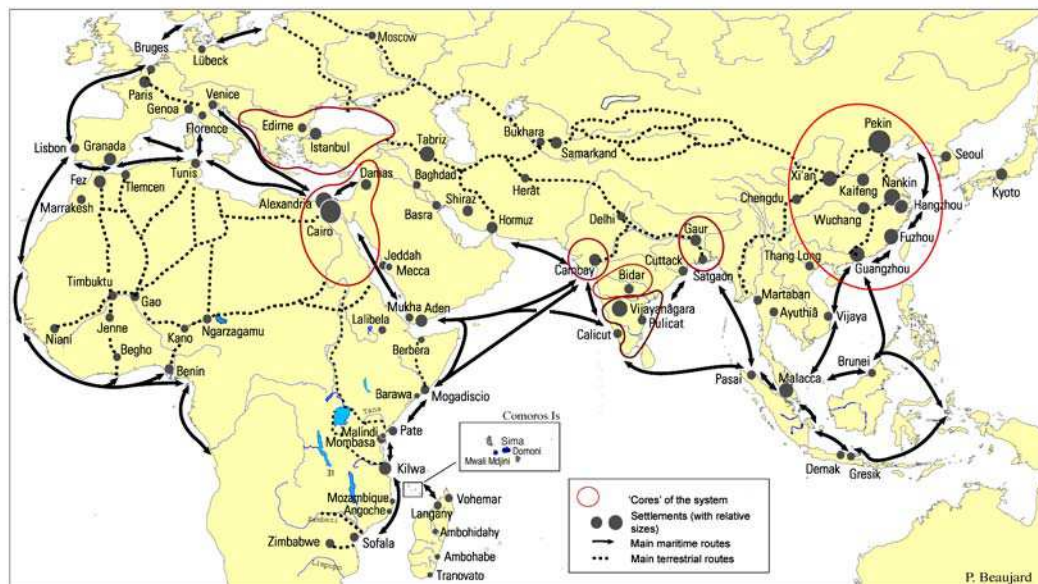


Fig. 6. The Eurasian and African World-System in the 15<sup>th</sup> century



to come via the Red Sea and Southern Arabia, a resumption of contacts with the Persian Gulf was nonetheless appreciable (Chittick 1974: 135, 308; Horton 1996: 293; Whitehouse 2001: 421). So too, China's economic influence came to be more strongly felt. Two Chinese fleets visited Mogadiscio, Barawa and Malindi in 1417 and 1422. Chinese pottery is found in many coastal towns in significant amounts, as well as in the Comoros and Madagascar, evidence of the growing integration of the world-system and of the increasing importance of China in this system. The same would appear to hold true for textiles from Gujarat, Coromandel and Bengal, and the multi-centered Indian core. Exporting primarily cotton fabrics, the Gujaratis now played an important role on the East African coast, while Swahili ships and merchants also sometimes crossed the ocean: among the foreign merchants in Malacca, Pires mentioned in 1515 'people from Kilwa, Malindi, Mogadiscio and Mombasa', and Chinese chronicles note that in 1415 a Malindi embassy gifted the emperor with a giraffe.

Kilwa nevertheless appears to have been in stagnation in the second part of the 15th century. This may have been connected to a decline in the gold trade, which was linked to the collapse of the Zimbabwe state (Beaujard 2007a), a collapse probably due to internal tensions and to global and local ecological reasons. Northern Swahili towns then became pre-eminent: Mombasa, Pate, Malindi and Mogadiscio. The Lamu archipelago experienced a social transformation, partly as a result of Omani Ibadi settling on Pate in the 15th century. Other developments of note were the growing importance of orthodox Sunni Islam, while contacts were maintained with Hadramawt, western Arabia and Egypt. The new merchant elite gradually imposed oligarchic regimes in the northern Swahili cities, at the expense of the hierarchically-stratified Shirazi system (Allen 1993: 202-208; Horton & Middleton 2000: 61; Sinclair & Håkansson 2000: 469-470).

The rise of the Swahili city-states culture induced a growing integration of the peripheries of the African coast in the world-system. New settlements appeared in Madagascar and the Comoros, in connection with the Swahili coast, India and Insulinidia. These settlements exported slaves notably to Yemen, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and India. The importance of this slave trade seems connected to the emergence of fortified villages on hilltops in the highlands of Madagascar, where the development of intensive rice cultivation led to a demographic growth and increased social complexity: chiefdoms in competition acquired textiles, ceramics and beads, and exported slaves and cattle to the coastal cities (Beaujard 2007a). A text written by Turkish admiral Piri Re'is (1521) reveals the great scale of the slave trade, for which the Comoros were a stopping point (Allibert 1988). In Madagascar and the Comoros we have developments of stone buildings and tombs similar to the buildings and tombs of the East African coast. Mahilaka was abandoned, perhaps due to the opposition from a neighbouring Malagasy kingdom, but new cities and towns cropped up south of Mahilaka, Langany being the main one. The Arabic nautical charts of the 15th and 16th centuries show a good knowledge of all the coasts and especially of the north of Madagascar. They mention Langany, and Vohemar which was flourishing in that period, as can be seen by the number of Chinese imports found in its cemetery, probably an evidence of prolonged contacts with southeast Asia via the Maldives (Manguin 1993; Beaujard 2003).

The Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean at the end of the 15th century. They would eventually attack and in some cases occupy key ports located at the network nodes, such as Goa in 1510, Malacca in 1511 and Hormuz in 1515. In East Africa, Sofala was occupied in 1503 and Kilwa in 1505. They also understood the complementary nature



of the trade in fabrics, precious metals and spices. Indian fabrics from Gujarat and the Coromandel were used to obtain gold from Sofala, which, in turn, was used to purchase spices in India and Southeast Asia (later on gold and silver would come from the Americas). It is not however because of the Portuguese foray that my study ends in the 16th century. The reason is that Europe built a new world-system at that time, with West Africa and the Americas. This allowed Europe to take the lead in the whole Eurasian and African world-system in the 18th century. The irruption of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean had only limited effects; it did not contribute to a weakening of the Swahili culture, but it did lead to a network reconfiguration that benefitted the Lamu archipelago and especially the city of Pate (Vernet 2005); in Madagascar, it was responsible for a slowing in the process of 'swahilisation' which was in progress along the coasts in the 15th century.

### Conclusion

Through its transoceanic contacts, the East African coast arose first as a periphery (phase 1), and then as a semi-periphery (beginning with phase 2) of the world-system. This coast served as an interface between (1a) the culturally and economically dominant cores that controlled the Persian Gulf, the Indian Sea, and the Red Sea, (1b) other semi-peripheries, such as South Arabia, or Southeast Asia, and (2) its own peripheries, which were both geographic (continental Africa and the neighbouring islands of the Comoros and Madagascar) and social (the lower classes of its city-states).

The integration of the East African coast into the world-system led to the emergence of politically independent mercantile and religious centres, and to the rise of an elite who converted to Islam. The first expansion to the Comoros and Madagascar took place at a time when the rest of the world-system was in a state of recession (8th-10th century), but after the 10th century, the East African semi-periphery synchronised with the pulsations of the world-system. The co-evolution of the Swahili semi-periphery with the cores of the world-system went alongside a growing integration of the whole region which was accompanied by the exploitation of the environment and of ever larger geographic and social peripheries, some regions or elites at the same time being able to profit from the dynamics of the system thanks to local favourable conditions. Madagascar represents a good example of the building of a periphery in this global context. Nevertheless, 'if the local is always part of the global, it does not mean that the local is produced by the global' (Friedman 2006). The evolution of the different parts of the system came from the articulation of local, regional and global dynamics; so we must look at the interactions between these different levels to understand the evolution of the different parts of the system. Some polities of the East African coast took advantage of local and regional resources (agricultural, mineral, and demographic) to take the lead in the competition between regions. It is impossible to understand Kilwa's rise and fall without considering its connections with changing Indian Ocean networks as well as with the Limpopo and Zimbabwe states, which provided gold, copper and ivory.

I have emphasised that, along with the core/semi-periphery/periphery structure of exchange, unequal relationships developed, both internal and external to each society. They can be attributed to a variety of factors. Cores – and, to a lesser degree, semi-peripheries like Yemen and Oman – controlled the flow of information and the means of communication, thus ensuring their advantageous access to resources and markets as well



as their ability to shop around the different peripheries; and so they ultimately gained power in the dialectic relation of supply and demand through, among other things, creating scarcity. Horton and Middleton note that the Swahili restricted access to certain types of imported foreign goods and produced their own merchandise – cloth, shell beads, leather, iron objects – for trade with their own peripheries located in the hinterland and on outlying islands. They never attempted to spread Islam to the interior but, on the contrary, they expressly ‘kept [it] as a coastal monopoly’ (Horton & Middleton 2000: 90). Through direct and indirect means, cores and semi-peripheries were able to impose both their products and their prices (low rates of exchange for goods coming out of the peripheries, and high rates for their own manufactured goods), thereby structuring an inter-regional order of labour. The importance of the control of the trade routes by the cores was obvious whenever a periphery or semiperiphery manufactured goods suitable for export; in the 14th and 15th century, for example, Mogadiscio produced textiles which were exported to Egypt, but the town was dependent on Yemeni or Egyptian ships; it had neither ships in sufficient number nor a political power strong enough to be able to impose itself on networks controlled by Karimi or other merchants. Mogadiscio was therefore unable to benefit from the existence of other markets. Even when they did not control the trade routes themselves, cores were nonetheless able to dominate from a distance by having intermediaries create chains of domination. In East Africa, this is clearly seen in the relationships between the Swahili merchants and their client groups (Middleton 1992: 19; Pouwels 1991: 381-382; Vernet 2005: 366-369, 524-525).

Inequality in exchange also arose from the nature of the products that were traded, and through the ways these products were obtained and exchanged. Horton and Middleton have pointed to a classic case in East Africa wherein the dominant parties from overseas and the coasts exchanged manufactured products for raw or semi-processed materials and for labour (generally, slaves) (also Alpers 1975: 265-266). Power relations were partly built upon the wealth transfers that occurred along the exchange networks, transfers which created – through various mechanisms – economic and political hierarchies between the various regions, states and classes of the system.

How can we explain the high (exchange) value of manufactured goods exported by the cores? It can be argued that manufactured products incorporated labour and (technological) know-how, which were valorised in the course of the exchange. It is however the exchange itself that determines the economic value. The value of exchange goods coming from the African peripheries remained low mainly because of the unfavourable exchange rate imposed by the cores. The intrinsic value of the object exchanged – whether measured by the labour input or coming from its supposed absolute or essential utility – determined the exchange value only to a small degree; we must therefore ‘give up the notion of [intrinsic] value and consider the exchange itself and the violence involved’ (Aglietta & Orléan 2002: 25, 107, 141; *cf.* Beaujard 2007b).

I wish to underline at this point the importance of the desirability of the goods exchanged. A manufactured object had social utility, which was determined in part by the quality of its materials and the technology that went into making it, but even more so by its capacity to create social hierarchies, a process which was linked to cultural systems and to power relations between the producer/exporter and the consumer. People in the African peripheries interiorised their status as the dominated party: procuring goods exported by dominant cores allowed them to gain and use a bit of the power belonging to the cores. Therefore, in order to obtain the imported prestige items which helped

them in achieving status, East African elites came to encourage and even promote the extraction of raw materials and the slave trade. Alpers writes: 'If Africans wished to continue to receive goods from abroad, they necessarily had to provide those goods that were required' (1975: 265-66). Elites redistributed some of the imported products (but only a small part of them) to their clients. They tried to make up for unfavourable rates of exchange by further exploiting their social and geographic margins. From the beginnings of the world-system, textiles were powerful tools of exchange; as important markers of status and signs of wealth and power, textiles were highly desired in the peripheries, so by exporting them the cores and the semi-peripheries profited greatly in both commercial and ideological terms (Middleton 1992: 42; Vernet 2005: 455). A clear illustration from East Africa is the story of the purchase of the island of Kilwa as told in Shirazi myths (Horton & Middleton 2000: 111). As is told in the Kilwa Chronicle, when 'Alī the 'Shirazi' arrived on Kilwa, he found that the island was controlled by a pagan king who agreed to sell it for some fabric. According to the agreement, 'Alī surrounded the island with cloth, a gesture symbolic of a commercial transaction which also expressed a process of urbanisation and served as a civilising action. To protect his new domain, 'Alī dug or had dug – using his magic powers – a channel which separated the island from the continent. 'Alī embodied two major features of the Swahili patricians as seen from the perspective of pagan Africans: they were the possessors of imported luxury products and of a religious magical power connected with Islam.

The form of trade that provides the best evidence of exploitation and a chain of dependency is one which Pearson has conveniently chosen largely to ignore: the slave trade. Trafficking in African populations endured for centuries. The slave trade sheds light on the interaction of the system's various mechanisms. Trade is not the only means for transferring surpluses. Political domination and armed conflicts can also play a role (the imposition of tribute and taxes, looting, etc.), as can relations of production or religious and client networks. When Sinclair and Håkansson argued that 'The towns exercised little if any political military domination over the interior' (2000: 475), they neglected to point out that in some cases the cities used their coastal allies for operations in the interior. Client networks were in fact essential for exchanges between the Swahili cities and the hinterlands. Besides, Ibn Battūta (1334) noted the incessant wars waged by the sultan of Kilwa against the infidels.

Moreover, transfers of wealth were not the only means for cores to achieve dominance over Africa (*contra* Frank 1998). This they also accomplished through ideological and political power acting via diverse 'strategies', such as alliances, intermarriages, and the conversion to Islam of the East African elite. The various forms of power came together and acted synergistically. The spread of Islam and subsequently, of Christianity, were built upon political and economic relationships. Ibn Battūta emphasised the generosity of the sultan of Kilwa, who used to give ivory and slaves to holy men from Irak, Hijaz, or other places abroad; this account, coming after the mention of raids in the Zanj country, captures the power relations that stretched from the cores to the African interior. It is clear that exchange is a relation of power, backed both by ideology and arms, and that the level of inequality in any exchange is proportional to the gap that exists between the two parties as measured in technology, in military strength and in social complexity.

Because of geographical factors, the Swahili coast developed a unique city-state culture in which the state and private modes of accumulation complemented rather than competed with each other. The state taxed private sector activities and also took part in



production and trade. Through a social contract between the political elites and the producer-merchants who controlled economic activity, merchants actively engaged in politics. Thus, a sort of 'proto-capitalism' thrived on the East African coast, similar to that of the cities and merchant sultanates that flourished in southeast Asia and on some parts of the Indian coast, in the interstices of the empires. In any event, in contradistinction to what happened in Europe from the 15th century, East Africa was unable to engender a macro-state with the potential to become a system core.

The world-system favours co-evolutionary phenomena, but these phenomena depend on special advantages enjoyed by some regions in their relation to the cores and to other regions. The East African expansion as a whole occurred at a slower pace and at a more modest level than in other areas also acting as hubs between cores and peripheries, south Arabia and southeast Asia for example. Up until the 16th century, the processes of domination at work but also local factors seem to have restricted the developmental possibilities of the east African coast: it suffered from its geographical and political fragmentation and did not have an agricultural potential comparable to that of Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, Java or China, which meant that its capacity for demographic growth was quite limited. Its distance from the system cores also worked against the competitiveness of the Swahili coast with other exchange zones. These various factors explain why this coast never managed to play as great a role as that of other semi-peripheries. Its major cities remained small in comparison to cities of other coastal regions that also served as interfaces. Unlike southeast Asia, the east African coast was unable to build large local markets or export industries on a significant scale or devise innovations that could create a competitive edge within the world-system. It never gave rise to production involving relatively complex technologies that could play a driving role in other sectors of the economy, a fact that must be linked to the limited possibilities of the private sector and the absence of a powerful state. These handicaps might help to explain, at least in part, the modern history of this region.

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